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SUBJECT: Muslim Mindanao Welcomes Ambassador and USS Peleliu

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¶1. Summary: Ambassador led a multi-agency team to Cotabato City and the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM) for two days of positive interaction through outreach and partnership activities. Ambassador spoke at a regional Islamic summit and at a poverty reduction forum organized by the Muslim Chamber of Commerce. Dinner meetings focused on the Moro Islamic Front's (MILF) project implementing body, and the Cotabato mayor, a leader in the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF). A reception aboard the USS Peleliu, anchored off-shore from Cotabato City, brought together leaders from diverse groups. Briefings by the International Monitoring Team (IMT) and local military leaders highlighted progress in the peace process. Ambassador inaugurated two USAID-supported projects and turned over donated items to local partners. Media coverage throughout the region and subsequently in national media was extensive and positive. End Summary.

COTABATO CITY - CAPITAL OF TWO REGIONS

¶2. Background: Cotabato City is geographically surrounded by the ARMM; however, it is administratively a part of, and served as the capital of, Sockssksargen from 1975 until 2004. It also serves as the headquarters for the ARMM, even though it is not a component of the region. The city shares a colorful history that has woven strong economic and cultural links with the surrounding cities of the two regions. This status as dual, and sometimes dueling, regional capitals created some unique managerial and political problems but overall has established it as a center of power for the entire area.

¶3. The economics of the city depend on its strategic location as a regional center of trade and services. Migration into the city over the last three decades has created occasional tensions, but in general has assisted in the development of a diverse and tolerant population. USAID activities have helped to foster a positive attitude towards the U.S., with only a few notable exceptions. In 2005, the city was the scene of several anti-American protests after USAID cancelled a controversial road project. These events are in sharp contrast to the current overwhelming support of the U.S. partnership. By continuing with other projects and ramping up efforts to reach out to the local population, the USG has succeeded in building a highly positive image.

REGIONAL ISLAMIC SUMMIT ON ENVIRONMENTAL GOVERNANCE

¶4. Ambassador was the featured speaker at the Khalifatul Ardh ("Stewards of the Earth") Regional Islamic Summit on Environmental Governance. The summit brought together over 200 Muslim leaders from academe, the public sector, religious groups, and civil society to produce a source book for teaching Muslim communities on how to manage natural resources and environmental protection. The guidebook was in partnership with USAID's Philippine Environmental Governance 2 Project. Ambassador praised the initiative of local leaders and conference participants encouraging the protection of

the natural resources for current and future generations.

MUSLIM WOMEN ENERGIZE CIVIL SOCIETY

¶15. The Cotabato Muslim Chamber of Commerce, a USAID assisted business development organization, sponsored the "Women's Forum on Poverty Reduction," at which Ambassador gave the keynote address. The theme was "Women - We Mean Business." Over 300 Muslim women in business, civil society, academe, politics, and government (including the mayor's wife, a UNESCO Commissioner) met to create action plans to energize poverty reduction. Ambassador congratulated organizers and emphasized the shared goals of the USG and the people of Mindanao, highlighting the important role of women in development and peace. In a sidebar conversation, female organizers told Ambassador that the idea for the conference was a direct result of experiences during their International Visitor programs in the U.S.

ENGAGING MILF AND MNLF LEADERSHIP

¶16. Mayor Muslimin Sema of Cotabato City also serves as Secretary General of the MNLF, its third-highest ranking member. He was enthusiastic about partnering with U.S. agencies and spoke highly of the USG and its efforts in Cotabato City and throughout Mindanao. In private discussions, Ambassador stressed the importance of peace and the need for a successful conclusion to the peace process.

¶17. Mayor Sema ruminated about his past life as a fighter with the MNLF. He noted that 25 years ago the swampy thickets and hills served as hiding places for himself and MNLF rebels, but he and others "grew tired of hiding in the bushes" and subsequently sought a non-violent path to political change.

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¶18. Joining the Ambassador were the Commanders of JSOTF-P and SOTF-12 as she hosted a dinner for the Bangsamoro Development Agency (BDA). The BDA was established by the MILF and serves as a project implementing body. It is designated in several agreements between the Philippine government and the MILF as the organization that will "manage" development assistance in the "Bangsamoro Homeland" following the signing of a peace agreement between the two parties. BDA leaders discussed their activities, but talked even more about their organization's current funding difficulties. The Ambassador reaffirmed USG's readiness to cooperate with and provide assistance to the BDA for certain activities.

¶19. Ambassador met with the leadership of the Malaysian-led IMT underscoring U.S. interest in its mission supporting the Philippine-MILF peace negotiations. As it monitors the cease fire, the IMT also observes the impact on the socioeconomic development of the stakeholders. Ambassador praised the IMT's positive contributions to the peace process as their presence adds another dimension in the progress towards stability in Mindanao.

¶10. Leadership of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' 6th Infantry Division and the Commander of co-located U.S. Special Operations Task Force 12 updated the Ambassador on regional activities. The importance of community relations activities was emphasized in supporting efforts for regional stability through positive engagement with the citizens.

MUSLIM WOMEN SMILING ON US NAVY HELICOPTERS

¶11. Ambassador and Commodore of Peleliu Pacific Partnership 2007 hosted a reception aboard the USS Peleliu, anchored offshore near Cotabato City, that brought together leaders from the various regional groups. The helicopter flight to the ship provided a once-in-a-lifetime experience for many. As Muslim women donned their helmets for the short flight there was an initial polite nervousness that slowly gave way to broad smiles reflecting their enthusiasm and confidence. The reception helped to forge closer ties and respect through the courtesy of the crew of the USS Peleliu and the friendly

inter-action between the guests and all USG personnel.

PARTNERING FOR PROGRESS AND DEVELOPMENT

¶12. Ambassador participated in two turn-over ceremonies that highlighted public infrastructure projects built in partnership with USAID. Cotabato City paid for a quarter of the construction. A large and enthusiastically pro-US crowd waving flags attended the ribbon-cutting for the "Cotabato Square," a public market located next to the new City Hall, which is part of a plan to create commercial and political centers outside of the congested central business district. The second ceremony was a boat landing in the rural Kalanganan district of the city that will significantly improve the economic viability of the local waterfront.

¶13. At both events, the Ambassador praised the projects as hopeful signs of continued commercial progress in Cotabato. The Ambassador also noted the benefits that peace between the MILF and the Philippine government would have for the local economy.

¶14. Ambassador and Commodore led a Project Handclasp donation of goods from the USS Peleliu to a local NGO affiliated with the Save the Children Foundation.

MEDIA RESPONSE

¶15. Media coverage of the two-day visit was extensive. All of the local print and TV outlets covered each of the Ambassador's public stops during the visit. Coverage by the wire services and a national TV network produced stories and photos that headlined subsequently on national media in Manila. The Ambassador did a live radio interview with a station that reached an additional audience from neighboring provinces, and gave an exclusive interview to national TV network ABS-CBN, which led to a 10-minute special on the Ambassador's visit to Cotabato and U.S. projects in the region plus an additional feature on broader U.S.-Philippine issues.

KENNEY